

CHINESE SHRINES OF HEALING

BY GEORGE BALLARD BOWERS.

CHOLERA, smallpox, and plague are always associated with China by Americans. Within the past ninety years, the many hospitals financed principally through American and European philanthropy have done much in service, and in the dissemination of ideas of modern sanitation to keep in check the epidemics that have always proven so disastrous in the Orient.

That I might myself see that progress so widely heralded by friends of China, I visited the Canton Hospital—one of the many in China—in the city of Canton, the oldest medical institution in the Orient, founded ninety years ago by Dr. Peter Parker, an American. Since its foundation, it has cost its American supporters many millions. In this institution, youths of China were first instructed in the science and art of healing. Here modern medical texts were translated into Chinese and here, too, medical research of the Orient was born. The first Chinese to study medicine abroad, financed by American Philanthropy, returned here to serve upon the staff of this institution. Within its walls, Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the Chinese hero and patron of Bolshevik doctrines that have made his country almost untenable for white men except Russians, commenced his studies.

Not only has this famous hospital been founded by American philanthropy, but more than eighty per cent of its running expenses have been drawn from the same source.

My visit to the hospital proved disappointing. There was a lock on the door, the great building was deserted, probably never to be retenanted. The local authorities had refused to protect the missionary administrators and the Chinese patients enjoying American charity. More than two million Cantonese had been treated there since its foundation, yet not one has protested.

At the sealed gate of this historic shrine of healing, with concealed chagrin, I turned to my English-speaking mission-educated guide.

"Do your people miss the hospital now that it is closed?"

"No, they have a shrine of healing that is more to their liking."

A five-minute walk through narrow streets of squalor, reeking in filth and smells brought us to the Chinese shrine of healing, a large squat building of stone, with tile roof. The entrance was a wide church-like door that emitted clouds of punk-smoke perfumed with incense. Here I paid the temple entrance fee of twenty cents. Inside I faced the God of Healing, enshrined upon an altar at the end of a windowless hall lit by suppliants. The image was made of lacquered clay painted red and gold.

While we watched the throng within, a mother came seeking a cure for her puny child already choking in the nauseating temple fumes. Her first act was to exchange the family earnings of the week for scraps of soiled paper painted to represent the coins she paid. With the scraps of paper she reverently approached the shrine to deposit them in a pot of live coals at the feet of the image. As soon as her offering has been turned to fluffy white ashes, the attending monk handed her a bamboo tube filled with numbered sticks. With trembling hands, the mother shook the tube until one of its sticks fell out at her feet. Smiling she watched the monk decipher its number.

"Twenty," he muttered; that was the enigmatic answer of the god, that was the number of the envelope containing the medicine prescribed.

The happy mother hurried away, the temple rules forbade that the sick be given their medicine within the temple walls.

"What was the medicine the god prescribed?" I asked.

The monk shook his head and shrugged.

But why do the rules forbid that the medicine you give be taken here?" I insisted.

"Before the rule was made, many died beside our sacred well," he smiled cynically.

As further questioning might have deprived some one of the waiting sufferers quick relief, I reluctantly went out into the village street with its bedlam of noises and smells, wondering where I might find more agreeable evidence of China's boasted six thousand years of civilization and that century of Christian effort.